

BROKEN MELODIES

Reflections on Small Black Box #23

by Luke Jaaniste

27 April 2003
Screening Room, Institute of Modern Art
Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts, Brisbane

The Xador Project (Jane Elliott - amplified cello, effects; Cameron Street - bass, effects, beat box)

The Joystick Thing (Bec Newman vocals and pelvic-mounted joystick; Matthew ? - vocals and acoustic guitar; Patrick King - computer running 'PD')

Project Project (Fiona Bennett - recorders; Jen Kwok - bass, effects; Cameron Street - reverb tray, effects; Scott Sinclair - guitars,samplers)

Plus foyer installation by **Patrick Durrance**

What follows is a reflection on one of the themes that seemed to emerge for me at SBS #23 - pessimistically, I'd say this is an overloaded, even 'false', reading of the event, but that is all related to this idea of 'broken melodies'...

SOUND MODEL?

Not only was SBB #23 a night for collaborations (as advertised), it was also a night for (female) fragmented acoustic melody accompanied by (male) droning electronic noise.

For those that were there, did you pick up on this?

Jane: on cello, reworking two found tunes.

Bec: on vocals, reworking original tunes.

Fiona: on recorder, working improvised tunes.

The boys creating drones that wove around and underneath the melodies, via electronic filtering/effects/boxes.

Accompanying Jane: a bass, 15 pedals and 2 beat boxes.

Accompanying Bec: a computer and PD software.

Accompanying Fiona: a bass, guitar and feedback box and 20+ pedals.

FUNNY ABERRATION?

The only 'aberration' to this model was the singing/strumming guitarist, Matthew in The Joystick Thing. This gender-bender (the only boy functioning in the melodic role that otherwise the girls functioned in for this night) was part of what added, I think, to the humour of the second set, which for me was definitely the highlight...

To explain: The Joystick Thing took the piss out of themselves and the music, which resulted in a much more interesting musical surface (lots of fragments and cut up sounds and bad singing that was somehow entirely pretty). And part of taking the piss was taking the piss out of the gender thing. Bec Newman in the place of the male lead singer, replacing the phallic symbol of the standard mic with the cyborg phallus of a joystick that sat on her pelvis (which was used to call up hiccupping samples of her own voice), and the shapely vulvic CB radio microphone (a microphone which is not always on/up, but needs its button pressed to get it aroused).

So Bec is in the place of the Male, and Matthew, by sitting physically and sonically behind Bec and often interchanging with Bec for the dominant melody, becomes in the place of Female who herself is in the place of Male.

(This is all starting to sound like a Shakespearian comedy.)

I am not saying this gender reading (which relies on polarised stereotypes) was completely in the minds of The Joystick Thing but I think it was unconsciously there, which added to the condition of humour (humour itself, as a cultural strategy, often relies on the subverting of polarised stereotypes - thus humour establishes stereotypes/paradigms only to screw with them, which is what I am suggesting happened with The Joystick Thing).

[Oh, by the way, I should say that one of my latest thoughts on art is that we theorise when we get bored. Which in this case shows that I wasn't really captivated by the night. Reading, especially a reading like this, doesn't happen when you're intoxicated.]

BROKEN MELODIES?

In all three performances, THE MELODY THING DIDN'T WORK...

The Xador Project seemed most comfortable when playing melody and accompaniment (which was juxtaposed with the 'ambient noise' sections which seemed like add-ons to me)...

But, while Xador's melodies were the best thing about their set, it left me feeling that there was a whole lot of sonic space untouched, and that the acoustic, essentially monodic (single-line) cello was no match, or a miss-match for the beef of its electronic counterpart, the electric bass, an instrument made polyphonic through its effects pedals.

In **Project Project**, the acoustic, monodic recorder sounded too thin and stuck out like a sore thumb over the ambient electronic pad created by the boys.

In fact, Project Project seemed most comfortable in the last 5 minutes of their set when they were in a pulsing full spectral drone, sounding like a mega-instrument accompanying itself, rather than four separate performers accompanying one another - and then they stopped leaving me high and dry!

And in **The Joystick Thing**, melody didn't work either. The difference however, is that they KNEW it wouldn't/doesn't work; they performed AS IF it wasn't going to work.

FUTILE OPTIMISM?

FERTILE PESSIMISM?

To elaborate, The Joystick Thing weren't *optimistic* about the interactions between the polarities of acoustic/electronic, monodic/polyphonic, girl/boy, human/machine etc. They were *pessimistic* (here I use the term in a neutral rather than negative sense) - taking the piss out of the whole notion that they could make music at all out of these polarities.

By happily rejecting their own premise, The Joystick Thing emerged making some great sounds that were really *particular* (= you had to be there to hear it, words are not suffice to describe it), as opposed to the two other sets which seemed *generic* (= if you were told what instruments were going to be used before hand, you could probably have imagined what it was going to sound like before you heard it - words like 'drone', 'ambient beats', 'noise', 'pulsing noise' are enough to describe it, because the actual sounds were simply calling up in our minds known memories of what we think 'ambient'-'experimental'-'music' is likely to sound like, in much the same way words do).

...You know how some TOP 40s production sounds particular, and others sound generic? Well probably it's the producers taking the piss out of their own technique who end up with the more particular (and for me, interesting) sounds...

The Joystick Thing's pessimistic irreverent rejection of their own premise was also what contributed to making it funny.

So melody/accompaniment and female/male does not work any more (nor human/machine, acoustic/electronic, live/not-live for that matter). I suppose I'm on the look out for musicians would perform knowing/showing that it doesn't work any more. It is one way of opening up possibilities for more interesting sounds and performances, from my point of view.

ANDROGYNOUS ENDING?

Should I go on to discuss the gonadic installation that was turned on during the intervals?

Did Patrick Durrance's installation, while similarly operated within this acoustic melody / electronic drone accompaniment paradigm, open up a possibility of thinking about sounds which transcended the stereotypes, creating a certain androgyny of these broken/impossible dichotomies?

Tucked away a one end of the IMA foyer the installation consisted of two metal cylinders (about a foot in diameter and two feet tall) that each just enclosed a horizontally-mounted speaker cones. Each speaker emitted a very loud rumbling drone. But there was also another sound, a high rattling buzz, and it was only upon looking into the cylinders that you could work out what was happening. Patrick had put about a dozen or so ping pong balls in each cylinder, bouncing around frenetically due to the immense physical vibrations from the speaker cones.

So we have a pretty gonadic sound installation when you think about it. Two large testicles filled with furious little spermazoids jumping around, waiting to jump out. Or is it two ovaries, with eggs waiting to be released one by one. (Occasionally ping pong balls did pop out of the cylinders.)

Here the acoustic melody (that might be pushing it, at least you could call it an upper drone layer which contained a type of random rhythmic element) is reliant 100% on the physical rendering of the digital electronic drone. Melody isn't apart but is *a part* of the drone - an extension of the speaker cones' own physicality transferred back into ping pong sounds.

So there's something else going on here, something different happening here in the sexless automata of the gonadic installation, than in the sexed consciousness of the acoustic melodic girls and noisy droning boys...

End Notes

* pessimism I have transferred the idea of futile optimism and fertile from my reading of an article by French art theorist Thierry de Duve titled "Ex Situ" (published in Art & Design magazine's Installation Art edition, 1994). Duve's argument is that certain installation artists in the 1960s who rejected the optimistic modernist ideal of the unity of space, place and human scale, actually achieved a greater artistic outcome/unity than the modernists, through their pessimistic (post-modern) approach.

** Is it pushing it too far to suggest that the take-the-piss music humour/experimentalism I've discussed in this article can also be found in other Brisbane musos such as: John Parker (as solo electronic noise artist Oxford Parker, or in the BP\$\$CH duo), CUNT (girly noise band), SMEAR (Bec Newman with Pete Goodwin and friends), even CUSTARD and REGURGITATOR? Is this a particularly post-Sir Joh, Bris Vegas Brisbane thing? I

don't know enough about the other scenes around Australia to know if it's a local or national trait...

*** The Joystick Thing had a heap of technical problems which I haven't touched on (computer not working for first five minutes, Bec's microphone intermittently working, joystick sampler intermittently working). This was either a natural outcome of their pessimistic slack aesthetic, or, one of the chief reasons for it. Hard to know which was the chicken and which the egg in this case.